EDITORIAL

Design participation(-s) – a creative commons for ongoing change

We present *Design participation(-s) – a creative commons for ongoing change* as the second set of the double special issue contributions that began in *CoDesign* 4 (1), March 2008. In the first volume, Liz Sanders and Jan Stappers, Yanki Lee, Tuuli Mattelmäki, Christina Brodersen, Christian Dindler and Ole Sejer Iversen, and Eva Brandt, Jörn Messeter and Thomas Binder collectively painted a picture of today’s dynamic landscape of experimentation with forms of joint inquiry for collaborative idea generation sparked by an openness towards what can be designed and adaptive deployment of participatory tactics. In the lively currents of participation in design and design research, the contributors offer new perspectives on how researchers are exploring core themes of *making design practices a creative commons for on-going change*.

The three contributions in this volume from Erling Bjarki Björgvinsson, Margot Brereton and Jacob Buur, and Thomas Binder and Eva Brandt take us into new territory for *co-creation* between designers and diverse ‘users’ and stakeholders. With historical inspirations as starting points, each article takes up the intricate challenges of realising ‘the ethos of participatory design’ (Brereton and Buur, this issue) in contexts where the boundaries of the participatory design projects are blurred, the distinctions between designer and user are no longer self-evident, and participation is as much about reflexivity as about pursuing predefined goals. In the first article, Björgvinsson proposes open-ended collaborative design for emerging social practices in which participatory design is seen as prototypical practice. In the second article, Brereton and Buur argue that participation is essential in the era of ubiquitous computing and that participatory design in some sense must become ubiquitous as well. In the final article, Binder and Brandt put forward the *Design:Lab* as a platform for collaborative inquiry and co-design experiments, where participation is deliberately staged as a junction of multiple stakeholders.

We point to three recursive issues that are raised rather than resolved by the contributions to the *Participation(-s)* double special issues. These questions posed by these themes confront the design community at large.

- The troublesome notions of ‘users’ and ‘stakeholders’ in changing relations in design.
- The significance of reflection and reflected practice in design research and practice.
- The co-design turn: what is gained and what is lost?

The troublesome notions of ‘users’ and ‘stakeholders’ in changing relations in co-design

Why do the labels and notions of ‘user’ and ‘stakeholder’ persistently hold on in light of changing relations and design contexts that recast ‘users’ as *co-creators*? How can we express new co-designing relations between designers, practitioners and other stakeholders and participants whose roles are already changed and changing in collaborative design...
inquiry? What would happen in design participation(-s) if we were to let go of boundaries these terms inscribe? What if this long-held dichotomy simply lets go of us as designers, by the force of ‘users’ acting as co-creators already out there? By what new design language can we express what we already see as more genuine mutuality of roles, learning and creating amongst participants in collaborative inquiry and making?

Each of the contributions in these two special issues touches on broad debates within contemporary participatory design and co-design communities in regards to mixed motivations for participation and variations in ‘designer–user’ relations and design intentions toward degrees of committed engagement in the cascade from participatory design, co-design and co-creation and use of similar methods in much conventional user-oriented and user-centred design research. Relations in design are also shaped by relative degrees of designer-led and user-led participation in design-oriented and research-oriented design projects (see Sanders and Stappers in the first special issue). In this issue, Brereton and Buur write, for example, that: ‘The nomenclature shift from “participatory design”, which seeks sustained engagement from practitioners and stakeholders to “user-centred design” which depicts the human in the more instrumentalist terms of “user” is revealing in itself. These shifts raise considerable questions about who really stands to benefit from participation in both the short run and the long run, locally and globally’. In contrast to conventional ‘user-centred design’, their case of the design of a digital noticeboard in a suburban community shows how adaptations of participatory design methods of iterative prototyping and continuous incremental research through distributed feedback via shopkeepers and residents regarding use of the noticeboard can lead to new kinds of participatory relations that take the researchers closer to members of the community, sharing in its everyday social life and routines.

Björgvinsson’s discussion stretches our notions regarding designers’ roles and designer–practitioner relations in different ways. He reports on how two designers developed a distinctive way of being together with nurses in the world of a large urban ICU for two years (see Hillgren 2006; Björgvinsson 2007). They acted as ‘arrangers of concrete experiments where the practitioners could explore new communicative spaces for exposing, reflecting and negotiating amongst themselves’. The collaborative design process that evolved was ‘primarily concerned with the meeting between co-workers and different professional domains within a community of practice’ (emphasis added), rather than on relations between designers and practitioners. Björgvinsson’s participatory design case is especially intriguing as it is based on a rare instance of a design research collaboration that was gradually taken over by practitioners during rather than after the project; the Intensive Care Unit nursing staff continue creating and using self-produced videos to this day.

Contrary to Björgvinsson’s description of a long-term collaboration with one organisational partner focusing on issues within a specific practice, Binder and Brandt report from short and intensive design projects that are grounded in sustained collaborations involving several institutional partners and, crucially, including people for whom the design is intended. Binder and Brandt offer the design:lab as a concept for design practice at large. The design:labs they have constituted in participatory design research over several years are marked by the intensity of designers’ planning and preparation of an ‘as-if world’ in which possible future practices are invoked through creative participation. Binder and Brandt argue that the prerequisite for success of a design:lab is that designers were able to stage ‘an agenda of change that led the partners to collaborate on equal terms’. Thus in the design:lab, ‘all partners have put material at stake in the collaboration. Only if the partners experience that they have put something into the collaboration for which they are accountable, and that what is taken up touches issues
essential for them, will they become full participants’. From session to session and even sometimes within sessions, which ‘partners’ or ‘users’ may take the lead changes and with this, various inter-changing roles are encouraged in collaborative inquiry and co-creation.

Reflection and reflected practice

There is an enticing – yet often illusive – invitation that we strive for reflection, reflected practice and reflective engagement in design commitments, that emanates particularly – although not exclusively – from the Scandinavian participatory design traditions. Both implicitly and explicitly, reflection, reflexivity and being reflective about one’s roles and in one’s relations come across as highly valued qualities and admirable dispositions to-be-realised. The desire to be reflective individually unto one’s self and collectively in regards to critically situating a design project’s methodology, scope and orientation toward society infuses future-oriented strivings for continuous learning and democratic quality of life. High value is attributed to reflection and being reflective as qualities in the self-knowledge of individual designers and practitioners; as constructive sensibilities in collective dialogue, negotiation and constitution of a culture of principled argument as a pre-condition for participatory design; and as means for conceptualising the design principles and social criteria of design projects. As designing is an inherently future-oriented practice, reflection is itself a meaningful design intention that deserves deliberate cultivation from the start. Ideally, reflective dialogue should carry through and endure beyond any single design project. The nuances of reflection, being reflective, and reflected practice are implicitly understood in Scandinavian circles but may be opaque to others. What might an unpacking of the nuances of these recurring terms in co-design discourse reveal?

Common to these three contributions is the use of what can be called experiments involving artifacts to spark reflection. Björgvinsson argues for ‘open-ended participatory design’ without any a priori agenda towards new technology or systems development. Björgvinsson’s discussion parallels Brereton and Buur’s in calling for many small in situ experiments to appreciate how iterative cycles of reflection that lead to reciprocal modification of design and use are quickened by practitioners’ creative appropriations of digital artifacts and other mediational devices. Björgvinsson concludes that ‘a focus on practice necessarily requires in situ explorations to see if the proposed design explorations invoke relevant prototypical practices in the midst of work’. Tools such as the self-produced videos created by the ICU nurses and nurse’s aides for continuous learning and reflective development of their practice and design metaphor games for probing qualities of the practice through discussion of metaphors of family and garden related to the ICU community of practice, are conceptualised and act as ‘temporary props for various settings, rather than as central features that define the settings of learning, knowing and working’. The power of props in design is in how they may invoke prototypical practices. Björgvinsson proposes ‘seeing design as the designing of props for a set of environments where people can temporarily incorporate the props into the setting in order to invoke relevant practices’. Generalising from the ICU case, Björgvinsson takes up questions that ultimately confront all designers and participating practitioners in co-development: ‘how the unknown future can be collaboratively explored and what is to be designed’ in the face of dilemmas for practitioners of constant change in procedures, equipment, people and emerging practices in dynamic professional practices.

‘How best to think of design research as an activity’ is an underlying motivation in ‘The Design:Lab as platform in participatory design research’ by Binder and Brandt.
Reflecting on a number of their design research projects, Binder and Brandt compare the laboratory with notions of the workshop, atelier and studio with special consideration of practices and tools employed to inscribe how ‘stakeholders collaboratively explore possibilities’, that have relevance for design. Binder and Brandt argue provocatively that the scientific laboratory is the most appropriate metaphor for the design:lab as ‘the lab’ points to issues that are often underexposed or neglected, namely, the emphasis on ‘a transparency of process and results contained in open recipes’. They conclude that the most important outcome of the design:labs ‘seems to be the experience from the process of collaboration that the participants could take with them’. Furthermore, the design:lab setting itself ‘became an opportunity for the partners involved to try out what could be accomplished in a collaboration spanning organisational and community boundaries. To the extent that this experience could be ‘packaged’, one of its valued results is the ability to reenact and continue the inquiry beyond the particular suggestions arrived at in the design:lab’. The design:lab framing of participatory design that Binder and Brandt offer thus implicitly favours mutual reflexivity as highly as free-standing ‘results’.

The co-design turn: what is gained and what is lost?

Co-design, participatory design approaches and participatory methods are less and less seen as specialised predilections and democracy-oriented motivations; participation(-s) are already out there, circulating in general design practice and ‘in the wild’. Participatory workshops of diverse kinds are amongst today’s general design methods; workshops vary widely in composition, duration, scale, purposes related to design phases and processes, and in designers’ intentions and relations towards participation and with participants. Individual engagement in authoring, self-documentation and other forms of creative participation in one’s own life with designed artifacts and media, signal quickening trends in design that gain momentum from new social media and ubiquitous computing. The move toward experience design, as it is meant to stage extraordinary, memorable experiences, is another influence that aims to enhance the interactive and performative qualities of designed products and services in ways that further incline designers towards participative strategies. Concurrently, there is a general paradigm shift towards interdisciplinary generation of knowledge and open collaboration in scientific, industry, government and civil society partnerships that are inclined towards participation of diverse public communities. Co-design has certainly gained currency as a general term, yet it often seems unclear how co-design and participation are meant in diverse contexts and particular design projects. When is ‘co-design’ a gloss of the original design process behind design works and design research writings? When are ‘co-design’ and ‘participation’ meant to convey the special kinds of relations and shared intentions of collaborative inquiry and committed mutual engagements between design researchers and diverse partners in design?

Brereton and Buur, as well as Björgvinsson, point to Suchman’s principled tenet that designers need to find ways to enter the networks of practitioners to understand design-in-use. When designers take seriously how unfinished design and designers’ responsibilities are at the point that designs reach practitioners, taking participatory design ‘into the wild’ poses new challenges for participation where there is no longer a well-delimited project site. Brereton and Buur argue that ‘design without the participation of the people involved is unthinkable’ given how closely intertwined the Internet and digital and ubiquitous technologies are with larger networks of people and everyday social practices. They explain that,
in our individualised, mobile, global, networked society with ubiquitous computing embedded into its fabric, we are less likely to encounter problems where there are limited and well-defined stakeholder groups and well-delimited technologies. Instead, what we observe and illustrate through our case studies is that the network of stakeholders related to any issue of concern is often highly complex and interrelated and the potential impact of any one technology for any one stakeholder may be small.

In seeking to transcend the traditional delimitations of ‘the design project’, Brereton and Buur are consequently reinterpreting participatory design tools and approaches such as prototyping and ethnographic field studies so that they can be made to work in the new innovative grey area between design and use. As ‘[t]he growth of social software points to the technique of deploying simple prototypes and growing and modifying them guided by feedback from use itself’, these require ‘more casual, exploratory formats of engagement with people’ and agility of design researchers in devising tactics for ‘iterative, experimental design explorations’ to understand interdependent distributed interactions in locally situated yet globally shaped contexts. They conclude that the era of ubiquitous computing requires finding and creating alternative formats of participation if participatory design is to be conducted with the ethos of looking out for the interests of less powerful stakeholders.

Binder and Brandt take a different route when they argue for the design:lab platform as ‘an approach to design research that builds on participatory inquiry and collaborative design with an emphasis on inquiry and knowledge production’. By this, they continue the tradition in participatory design of conceptualising co-design as mutual learning, as they make the design:lab an ‘as-if world’ where ‘envisioning of possible futures can go hand in hand with rehearsing of new practices that can turn these possibilities into reality’. Where Brereton and Buur propose the exploration of the grey area between design and use and Björgvinsson suggests an embedding of co-design in the everyday of communities of practice, Brandt and Binder point to ways to rethink the participatory design project as a laboratory that is not a specific site but rather as a mode of inquiry giving emphasis to a transparency of process and results contained in open recipes. Design:labs can thus be staged and scaled to enter into ‘the messy world outside’ with the potential for participatory co-design approaches to enter new arenas of multi-sited social milieus and innovation practices.

The contributors to these two special issues of CoDesign are careful to argue for their methodological and relational approaches, distinguishing their innovations for participation(-s) within the affinity network of participatory traditions and codesign approaches. The articles in the special collection make it clear that there are both underlying long wave trends moving like tectonic plates under the sea and many recent quick turns towards participation that become visible cumulatively in the codesign turn.

References

Thomas Binder, Eva Brandt and Judith Gregory
Copenhagen and Chicago